

Book Review



Ghosts of the ETO, American Tactical Deception Units in the European Theatre of Operations, 1944-1945, by Jonathon Gawne. Published by CASEMAT (Havertown, Pennsylvania) 2002, 342 pages, more than 100 photos. The ISBN is 0-9711709-5-9 for a hardback (\$34.95).

For more than 50 years, a veil of secrecy lay over the role of tactical deception employed by the U.S. Army in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO) in World War II. This veil was lifted during 1996, when information was declassified regarding these deception operations and the Army organization that—for the first time in the history of warfare—was created to execute tactical deception operations as its full-time mission.

In an important new book, *Ghosts of the ETO*, author Jonathon Gawne chronicles the formation and activities of the U.S. Army's 23d Special Troops and credits its wartime deception operations with saving American lives and contributing to the Allied victory. In revealing the 23d's World War II activities, Gawne analyzes the role and importance of tactical deception and—in light of the Army's "deactivation" of a formalized deception capability following World War II—points to the need for the Army to revive tactical deception as a necessary tool for waging war.

Gawne identifies the two features that made the 23d a unique organization: One, it was the first organization in the history of warfare that was organized and dedicated to conducting tactical deception on a continuing basis. In the past, the great commanders—including Napoleon, Caesar, Hannibal and Lee—conducted deception operations on an *ad hoc* basis. They employed all or a portion of their troops in a deception operation, and when this operation was completed, the troops returned to their normal fighting roles. For the 23d, tactical deception was its sole mission. The organization was, in effect, a military traveling road show. It would perform its deception act in one location, and when the operation was completed, it would move on to another location and perform a similar or different act. At times, its units performed simultaneously in different locations.

Two, the organization raised tactical deception to a highly sophisticated, full-spectrum level. It was able to reproduce the "sights and sounds" of the various units and headquarters of a field army.

Gawne has written a fascinating, thoroughly researched, well-documented, and very readable account of this unique organization, covering the "what, where, when, how, and why." He describes its genesis and its activation as well as its "growing pains." He also describes, analyzes, and evaluates each of the 21 major deception operations, culminating with the 1945 crossing of the Rhine River. For each operation, he gives the "big picture" as well as a "nuts-and-bolts" account of what happened. Each deception plan has a battle sketch to facilitate easy understanding of the concept of operation. And an understanding of

the tools of deception is enhanced by the inclusion of many photographs.

This new concept of tactical deception originated in the ETO as a result of a study initiated by General Devers, then the commanding general, which analyzed Field Marshal Montgomery's use of deception at the battle of El Alemein. General Devers submitted a request to the War Department for a unit to be authorized, organized, and dedicated to tactical deception, with the capability of simulating two infantry divisions and one armor division for the crossing of the Rhine River. This request was approved, giving birth to the 23d Special Troops.

The 23d consisted of a headquarters, a headquarters company, and four line units—two of which were engineer units:

- An engineer camouflage battalion to provide inflatable dummy tanks, trucks, artillery pieces, and other types of vehicles and equipment as well as to operate flash devices replicating the flash of artillery firing.
- An engineer combat company to provide perimeter security against enemy forces as well as local security against enemy agents and the local populace; conduct mine clearing; execute construction and demolition tasks, including digging tank and artillery positions; and simulate tank tracks by using bulldozers.
- A signal company to transmit false radio messages.
- A sonic company equipped with half-tracks and loudspeakers to reproduce sounds such as tanks on the move, assault boats in action, and bridging operations.

The 23d was activated at Camp Forrest, Tennessee, on 20 January 1944, with an eventual strength of 82 officers and 1,023 enlisted men. In the beginning, there was no guidance, no doctrine, no manuals, and no SOPs. Throughout most of the life of the organization, it was a matter of learning by trial and error—a large part of which occurred on the battlefield.

The organization's first mission was a small operation called Troutfly. A lieutenant and 13 radiomen landed in Normandy on D+3. The original plan was aborted, and the detachment became the 82d Airborne Division's main means of radio communications. The division had lost almost 95 percent of its radio equipment on D-Day.

The 23d participated in 21 major deception operations and several smaller ones that extended from Normandy to Brittany and Brest, through the rest of northern France, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany to the Rhine River and involved most of the divisions, corps, and armies.

By the time of the Rhine crossing, the 23d Special Troops was a seasoned organization, having learned its lessons well. And senior headquarters had gained an appreciation for deception and how to properly utilize the capabilities of the unit.

Some important lessons learned along the way include the following:

- There was a lack of knowledge of deception and appreciation for its value on the part of many commanders. Some showed little interest in employing deception, others used deception only halfheartedly, while others misused it.
- Close and continuous coordination of the deception operation with other aspects of the tactical plan was vital to success. In an attack at Brest, the maneuver plan was changed at the eleventh hour to have the main attack pass through the area where a deception buildup of forces had been portrayed. With the Germans in waiting, unnecessary casualties were sustained and tanks destroyed.
- The use of "special effects" was not considered during training in the United States. However, once the organization initiated operations, special effects became an important means of

completing the deception picture. Special effects involved the identifying features of the simulated units, such as shoulder patches, bumper markings, and command post signs. While the 23d units wore and displayed these identifying features, the simulated units were required to black out and remove their own identifying features. Special effects assumed progressively greater importance as the German aerial observation capabilities decreased, and the enemy placed increased reliance on ground observation for intelligence information.

- Tight local security was needed to prevent enemy agents and the local populace from observing certain aspects of a deception operation, especially the dummy equipment.
- It was not only necessary to deceive the enemy and the local populace but also to deceive *our own* troops to maintain secrecy of the deception operations. Enter another phase of playacting; scripts outlining the simulated unit's organization, recent activities, and current officers were given to the soldiers. Ad libbing was often required to satisfy incredulous officers and enlisted men as well as to carry on conversations with the local populace.
- Probably the most important lesson learned was the necessity for strict discipline and attention to detail during the planning and execution phases of a deception operation. Failure to do so could easily compromise an operation. Enemy intelligence was continuously on the lookout for operational irregularities and mistakes.

The crossing of the Rhine—known as Operation Viersen—was a classic deception operation, executed the way deception should be executed. The staff member of the 23d who masterminded the deception operation portion of the tactical plan was stationed in the Ninth Army G3 section to work closely with all elements of the Army staff and to monitor the execution of the deception operation. Consequently, the operation carried the full authority of General Simpson, the Army commander, resulting in the development and execution of detailed plans at all subordinate levels. In this operation, the 23d simulated—with all of its sights and sounds—the 30th and 79th Divisions. These simulated divisions were deployed in the center of the army sector with the mission of feigning the main attack on 1 April. To fill out the deception picture, as happened in some of its previous deception operations, the 23d was augmented with real units—in this case there were infantry, engineer, antiaircraft artillery, field artillery, and tank units. When the two real divisions attacked to the north, crossing the Rhine in the vicinity of Wesel on 26 March, they suffered only 31 casualties. This extremely low casualty figure was considered a remarkable achievement in view of the fact that the Rhine was a major barrier defended by a determined enemy and constituted the last barrier to entry into the heartland of Germany. In a letter of commendation to the 23d, General Simpson recognized its considerable contribution.

While the 23d participated in a few deception operations that were aborted, some that were of uncertain success, and others that were quite successful, the overall performance of the organization in these operations was judged as excellent. A measure of the real contribution of the 23d to the winning of the war was not in the number of Germans killed but rather in the many thousands of American lives that were spared.

In summary, *Ghosts of the ETO* is an excellent, balanced history of the 23d Special Troops. Gawne tells the story like it was—warts and all. I say this because I was there as commander of the 406th Engineer Combat Company.

Besides telling the story of the 23d, the book is important for another reason. To date, no book written about the war in the ETO has included the participation and impact of the 23d's effort on the outcome of the tactical plans of divisions, corps, or armies. This is understandable since the activities of the 23d were only recently declassified. In the future, such books should include a discussion of the organization's participation and an evaluation of its contribution to

the outcome of the tactical plans in order to provide a complete story of what occurred. For the same reason, sections of many books already written about the battles in the ETO should be rewritten. This book is an excellent starting point for researching this new dimension in many of the ETO battles. In addition, many of the Army's field manuals need to be rewritten to incorporate the deception doctrine and techniques developed by the 23d, but they should be updated for the 21st century.

Gawne also addresses, in a limited way, the future of deception. He suggests that—building on the 23d's World War II experiences—new equipment, doctrine, etc., need to be developed that incorporate the latest technology. I venture to add the following comments:

With this "Everything-You-Ever-Wanted-to-Know-About-Tactical-Deception" book now on the market, it is fair to assume that at least all of the major foreign armies, intelligence agencies, and military schools will buy the book to learn about the sophisticated use of deception as developed by the Army in the ETO during World War II. With this background, foreign armies may do at least three things:

- Direct their intelligence agencies to ensure that they have the capability of gathering information on the full spectrum of the sights and sounds of the U.S. Army.
- Develop their own tactical deception units to operate on a continuing basis.
- Emphasize the teaching of deception in their service schools so that officers and noncommissioned officers at all levels are knowledgeable in the art.

What must the U.S. Army do? It must build on the solid foundation of the battlefield knowledge the 23d Special Troops gained in World War II and move forward by taking advantage of the latest technology and military thinking. To do this, the Army should establish a full-time organization to continuously study tactical deception with the goal of developing doctrine, materiel, etc., appropriate for future warfare. This organization should be charged with—

- Developing criteria, requirements, and funding for research and development of new, advanced tactical deception equipment.
- Developing doctrine, procedures, techniques, tables of organization and equipment, SOPs, etc., appropriate for the employment of a self-contained tactical deception unit.
- Ensuring that our intelligence agencies are devoting sufficient resources toward determining the enemy's means of intelligence gathering so that ways can be developed to neutralize, counter, or turn these means to our advantage.
- Ensuring that tactical deception is emphasized in its various aspects in the curricula of all of our service schools. Gawne's book should be a part of the course material.

The end product of these activities is a self-contained organization that is dedicated to tactical deception operations on a continuing basis and is operational at the outbreak of hostilities.

The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command should incorporate tactical deception in future organizations and training, to include all service schools.

Based on the above discussion, there is reason to believe that *Ghosts of the ETO* may be one of the most important books to come out of World War II. It should be read by all officers from the highest to lowest rank and by all noncommissioned officers.

Reviewed by Major General George A. Rebh (Retired). In addition to commanding the 406th Engineer Combat Company, ETO, he served in various units, U.S. Army Corps of Engineer Districts, and Chief of Engineers positions during his 32-year military career. He is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and was a Rhodes scholar.